

The Origin of Blin: An overview*

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Introduction

Blin are one of the nine ethnic groups of Eritrea. They belong to the Cushitic race and are more related to the Cushitic people of Agaw in Ethiopia than the Cushitic people in Eritrea. They live in and around the town called Keren, in a radius of about 40km. They are surrounded by Tigre and Tigrinya speakers (Semitic people). Thus, mostly they are bilingual or trilingual. Their language is mostly limited in house, but recent developments show that they started to use the language in Primary Education. A number of written materials and recorded cassettes of folk songs and dramas are also appearing recently that indicate the revival of the language.

Blin consists of Tarqe, Tawqe, Neged (a dozen of tribes claiming different origins) and other clans who claim Blin. The population of this group is estimated about 90 000 but there is no accurate population census since the Italian era that can be reliable. The population size seems decreasing from time to time due the influence of the Semitic groups in both sides, i.e. Tigre speakers from the North and West and Tigrigna speakers from South and East. For instance the Adrba people, who are Tarqe originally, don't speak Blin. This is true also with people around Elabered and people of Seleba and Debresina. Mostly Blin are sedentary agriculturalists with some herdsmen. Their religion until the second half of the 19th century was Orthodox Christianity. But after this time, during the Egyptian invasion, the Tawqe were converted to Islam while the Tarqe received Catholicism. There are few who retained their Orthodox Christianity.

Since when these people started to be called Blin is yet unknown, but different people define the word Blin in different meanings. Some say the word **Blin** is derived from **Blenyto** in Saho, which means “**Christians**”. While, others say it means “**beautiful**” in Hebrew. The Blin region is called **Bogos**, which has different meanings according to different people. Some say it is a combination of **Beg** and **Wes** which means “**sheep and cattle**” respectively. It is said the place was good for

* *This short paper about the origin of Blin is not a researched work. **PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE!***

herding sheep and cattle. Others say Bogos was a name of a man who was the eldest of the Blin who came and settled on the place where they are now. According to these people the Blin who migrated to this place belong to two big brother families; **Bogos** and **Hagos**. Since Bogos was the elder the region was named after him. The Bogos region is also called **Senhit**. It is derived from **senih'na**, which means “**to go slowly**”. These etymologies need more study and investigation. Senhit is used as the name of the province in which the Blin, Mensae, Maria and few Tigrigna speakers live, now part of Anseba region since 1996. However, locally Senhit refers to the Blin who live West, East and South of Keren and around Keren; i.e. the Blin who don't belong to Tawqe. Thus Blin divide themselves into Senhit and Taqur, Similarly, nowadays the word Bogos is used only in political issues and historical perspectives.

The main purpose of this short paper is to describe the origin of Blin in historical perspective in comparison to the traditional history of Blin, which says Blin migrated from Ethiopia (Lasta). Moreover, the paper will explore the Eritrean races and go further in describing the settlement of Agaw people, which is the basis for the current situation of Blin.

The Eritrean Races

Today, in Eritrea there are three main races: Nilotic, Hamatic (Cushitic) and Semitic. These three races had had different modes of life, and physical appearances.

1. **The Nilotic:** They are the indigenous people of East Africa originating from the region of the Nile River, after which they are named. They have often a taller and slimmer physical appearance than the average human being. This race used to dominate most of the African parts thousands years ago before BC. They used to depend on wild fruits and hunting for their daily life. Eventually due to climate change they started to develop agriculture; and slowly they moved in towards the central highlands looking for fertile areas. Today we find some remnant cereals of this people like “Barer” and “Badenay”, which indicate that they used to grow crops. The second reason they were driven in is due to the invasion of Cushitic people from the North East Africa. Usually these people are associated with cattle herding. Currently they are found in the Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. In Eritrea they are represented by **Baria** (Nara) and **Baden** (kunama).
2. **The Cushitic/Hamatic:** This race is named after the Biblical figure Cush (Ham). This race entered East Africa from the North starting from Egypt to the western coastal areas of the Red Sea around 5000-3000BC (Ghaber 1995). It

was the era which had witnessed severe drought. The Cushitic people pushed the Nilotic to central East Africa around the Nile River and started to live in the desert. They use animals like camel that can tolerate desert conditions. They used these animals for transportation and food. These people were having highly developed skills in buildings and music. The Giza pyramids in Egypt are the product of these skills (Ghaber 1995) and the recent building of St. George rock hewn church of Lalibela is another example. As Raka (1986) mentioned Adulis was built by the people who fled from the slavery of the Egyptian king. These were probably the Cushitic people. Today they dominate the Horn of Africa; Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Eritrea. In Eritrea they are represented by **Afar, Blin, Beja** (Hidareb) and **Saho**.

3. **The Semitic:** This race is named after the Biblical figure Sem like Cush. It is the race that entered Africa around 1000BC from the Arab peninsula crossing the Red sea. They are well known as Habesha, Sabians, or Agazian and are related to Arabs and Hebrew. These people used to live in the highlands and rainy regions of today's Yemen. After crossing the Red Sea, due to their inability to tolerate the hot weather of coastal areas, they moved up to the central high lands of today's Eritrea and Ethiopia. They were well developed in agricultural system and most of all in writing skills, which the two previous races lack. Although their number was very low compared to the Nilotic and Cushitic they easily influenced and dominated the region. They are found in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Today in Eritrea they are represented by **Tigre** and **Tigrinya**. Besides, there are few recently immigrated Semitic races from the Arab Peninsula to Western Red Sea coastal areas represented by Rashayida in Eritrea.

The Agaw people and Languages

The Agaw people are one of the Cushitic races. They are also known as Central Cushitic. They are ancient inhabitants of the Northern and Central highlands of today's Ethiopia and Eritrea (Ghaber 1995, Tamrat 1986, Ullendorff 1960). According to a number of experts like C. Conti Rossini the Agaw people were either forced out of their original settlements and formed a number of scattered enclaves, which they are now or assimilated with Semitic people and adopted their culture (Tamrat 1986). Ullendorff put it explicitly as follows: "*the substrate population per excellence are the Agew, who inhabit the northern and central Abyssinian plateau*".

One of the factors that played a significant role in assimilation and integration of the Agaw people was the Axumite kingdom (Tamrat 1986). The kingdom was unified and centralized, and those who rebel were treated very harshly. Thus, people were cooperating with the kingdom to be brought to the socio-economic life of the kingdom. According to Tamrat (1986) the Agaw people were forced to adopt the culture and language of Semitic people so as to participate in the economic, administrative, political and military affairs of the kingdom. Besides, the Axumite kingdom was also succeeded in converting the people into Christianity which greatly affected the Agaw culture. Their ancestral lineage has been constructed to make them the generation of King Solomon, which is the Ethio-Christian legend (Tamrat 1986). For instance the Qwara and Kayla (Falasha, Bet Isreal) claim that they are descendents of King Solomon and moved to Israel in the late 80s. Despite the continuous influence and domination of the Semitic culture, the Agaw people were able to retain at least their language identity and traditions in the form of dispersed islands.

During the Axumite kingdom the political leadership was in the hands of Semitic language speakers for a long time. However, the Agaw people appeared by the end of the dark periods of the kingdom and they established their own dynasty, *Zagwe Dynasty*. Zagwe dynasty came from a Christian royal family of the Agaw people. It ruled from the end of Axumite kingdom till 1270 for about 375 years (Raka 1986) or 200 years (Tamrat 1986). Zagwe means “of Agaw” in Geez and others (Raka 1986) say it is derived from the Geez word “Ze-Agwyeye” which means “the chaser”. Zagwe dynasty kept all the Axumite kingdom cultures and traditions intact and transmitted them to the later generation (Tamrat 1986).

The Agaw language forms the main substratum of Semitic languages, particularly Tigrinya, and Amharic. Most of the existing Agaw language speakers are bilingual, speaking both Agaw and Semitic languages (Amharic, Tigrinya and/or Tigre). The Current Agaw people can be classified into four categories.

1. Northern Agaw are **Blin**. They live in Eritrea, in and around **Keren** in the former province of Senhit now the Anseba zone.
2. Western Agaw includes **Qemant, Qwara and Kayla (Falasha, Bet Israel)**. They live around **Gonder**, of the Amhara region, north of Lake Tana and West of Takkeze. The Qemant is endangered. Of the estimated 172 000 only 1650 retain the language. Most of the remaining speakers of the Qemant language live near Aykel, about 60 km west of Gonder and North to Lake Tana. They

are known as **Armachoho Qemants**. The Qwara is nearly extinct, who used to live in the Qwara region but now in Israel. The kayala are also moved to Israel.

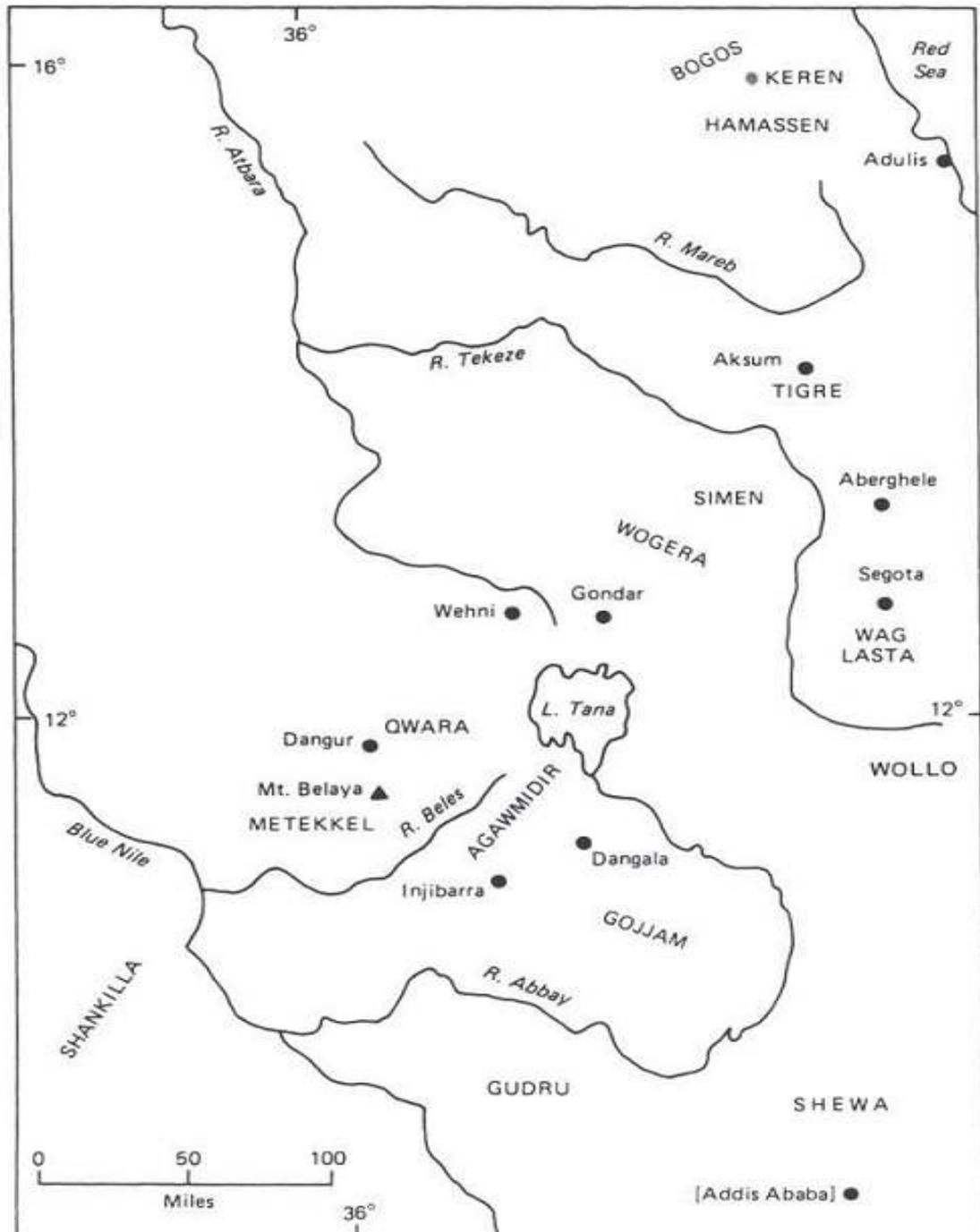


Fig. 1

The Agaw people settlement (Tamrat 1986)

3. Eastern Agaw are **khamir** and **Khamta**. They live around **Sokota** in the former province of Wollo, now part of Amhara province. They are sandwiched between the Southern Tigray and the Amhara Speaking people. There are about 143 000 speakers of this language. Tigray and the Amhara Speaking people. There are about 143 000 speakers of this language.
4. Southern Agaw includes **Awngi** and **Kunfal**. The Awengi speakers live southwest of Lake Tana, around **Injibara** and **Dangla** in the current Amhara province. It is the largest of the Agaw people with about 350 000 speakers. Whereas, the Kunfal is spoken East of Lake Tana.

The origin of Blin

There are two theories concerning the origin of Blin. The first one is well known among all Eritreans and other scholars. The second one is not well investigated and researched. However, it seems more scientific and can explain the current situation of the Agaw people in general and Blin in particular.

I. Oral Tradition Explanation. This is the story known among the Eritrean population, including the Blin themselves and among most scholars. The immigration of Blin was first recorded by great Historians like Conti Rossini. Although the historians and writers give different reasons for the cause of immigration all of them agree that the Blin migrated from Lasta. Here, I will mention the account given by Michael Ghaber (1995). The first migration of Blin (Tarqe qur) took place at the end of 10th century during the reign of Queen Gudit. Since she was a Jewish follower, she established a Jewish religion and ruined many churches of the Zagwe dynasty. This was the time when Blin, about seven people headed to North from Lasta led by Tarke. They crossed the highlands and settled in the Bogos region. There were Baria (Nilotic people), Bellow and Kellow (both Beja) in Megarih before the Tarke came to this area (Ghaber 1995). The Baria moved to Gash region. The Bellow went to coastal areas of Red Sea whereas the Kellow went to Barka.

The second group migrated in 1270 at the fall of Zagwe dynasty, led by Tawke. This group started its migration from Qwara region. They crossed the highlands of today's Eritrea and the Bogos and settled in Halhal region. In the Adi Tekelezan region they resided for a long time. Thus, there are some remnants of this group in the Hamasien region, around Adi Teklezan (Teklejan) and Dembezan (Dembejan). The latter

indicating the original place of these people, Dembiya. Sometimes the Tawke people are also known as Tewkejan. There were other Agaw people called Bet Musi before the Tawqe came to this region. After heavy fighting Tawqe subdued them. There are few who escaped the killing, now live around the Begu region. Today they are called Laguen according to Ghaber (1995). But I heard they are called "*Klal Alebom*".

However there are some obscure issues and questions that need to be scrutinized.

1. How did the Blin cross the hundreds of kilometers in this small number and reach the place where they are now with all the invasions and diseases? Weren't there people in the route, when the time was full of raids?
2. How it was possible for this small group to force out the original settlers (Baria) of the area? Was the number of the Baria people smaller compared to them?
3. If they were in such few numbers, how were they able to grow to the present number given all the difficulties? On the contrary it seems that the size of Blin speakers is shrinking.
4. On the route from Lasta to Keren one finds the following places' and villages' names (either in Agaw or Blin) sequentially: Adi Bargele, Adkeme, Halhale, Wekidiba, Serjaqa, Didgdig, Shindiwa, Habiremgakha, Biladiba, and Derkunakh. How were they able to name these places while they were just passing through the route?
5. The demographic movement, in that era was always from East to West and North to South. Barbarians to Europe, Europeans to America, Arab to North Africa, can be mentioned as example of East to West. The migration of Cushitic, Nilotic, and Bantu people was from North to South. Why then Blin migrated from South to North contrary to the global demographic movement?
6. There is always a channel of connection between groups of people who have a similar culture. For example, Saho, Afar and Somali; Baria and Baden; Tigre, Tigrinya, and Amharic. The settlement of these people is connected. However, there are about five scattered enclaves of Agaw speaking people, which are not connected to each other. Why then formation of these islands of Agaw speaking people in the sea of Semitic people?
7. Who are Bet Musi? Why only the migration of Tarqe and Tawqe is mentioned as a history of Blin while there were other Agaw people before them?

Thus, to find an answer to these ambiguous questions we have to look for other possible alternative theories.

II. 'Scholastic' Historic Explanation. This explanation is concomitant with the demographic movement of Cushitic people. The Cushitic people spread from Egypt to the Northern Kenya around 5000 to 3000 BC. The region from South Egypt to Halhal (Keren area) and all the coastal areas of Semhar and western lowlands were occupied by Beja. Agaw occupied the highlands from Halahal to Agaw Midir. The western Red Sea coastal areas starting from Semhar region to South till present North Kenya were occupied by Saho, Afar and Somali sequentially. The Southern central Ethiopian highlands were occupied by Sidamo and Oromo. While this was the settlement of Cushitic people, around 1000BC Semitic people crossed the Red Sea from the Arab Peninsula and entered the Western coastal areas of Red sea. Since these people were used to live in highlands and rainy areas of Yemen, they were not able to tolerate the hot coastal areas. Thus, they moved up to the highlands where the Agaw people used to live. The Semitic people came with a well developed writing and agricultural skills. The Agaw people easily received the language and skills of these people. As a result they were influenced and eventually dominated by the minority Semitic people. After long intermingling between the Agaw and Semitic languages, a new culture and languages were created: Tigre, Tigrinya and Amharic (Tamrat 1986, Ghaber 1995). Amharic has more frequency of Agaw speech than Tigrinya. The Semitic language influenced not only the Agaw language but also the Beja, Saho, Afar, Sidamo and Oromo languages. The Tigre culture and language influencing the Beja spread to the North and the West: starting from Semhar, Mensae, Sahil, Bejuk, Maria and later Beni-amir. Tigrinya totally dominated the highlands of Agaw language; and Amharic influenced the Afar and Oromo spread to southern highlands. Thus, we can say that the enclaves of the scattered Agaw people are the people who retain their Agaw culture and language. This can explain the existence of Blin in and around Keren and the existence of other islands of Agaw languages.

There are a number of Agaw tribes who assimilated with Semitic people in the highlands of Eritrea and Ethiopia: Adkeme Miligae, Liban, Zawl, and Logo Chiwa (Raka 1986). Meroni tribes, one of the largest tribes in Eritrea are also claimed to be originated from the Dembiya region, and used to speak a language similar to Agaw (Raka 1986). The names like Janhoy, for Hailesilassie, came with these people (Raka 1986). Janhoy means "O elephant" in Agaw. It is given to a person with a power. Thus, most probably they were Agaw. As Raka (1986) mentions Liban and Adeghe (now extinct) were in the region of Debere Sina before the Mensae. The current inhabitants of Beleza, kwazen and Geremi are claimed the remnants of Agaw

people who used to inhabit the Karneshim region (Raka 1986). In the Seraye region there was a Queen with the name “Blen Seb-a” who claimed to be Agaw before Bellow (Beja) came to that region (Raka 1986). According Raka (1986) there are also extinct tribes of Agaw; Bet Aweqe in the Sahil region, and Bet Musi in the Keren region. The traditional laws of different clans of the highlands, for instance laws of Adkeme-milga and Logo-Chiwa are related to the Zagwe laws and laws of Agaw in Lasta (Ghaber 1995). Besides, there are a number of places and villages in the highlands of Eritrea and Ethiopia with Agaw names: Serejaqa, Weki, Dighdigh, Wekidiba, Adi Mengweti, Shiketi.....etc. Nevertheless, Raka doesn't believe the Agaw were indigenous dwellers but ancient migrants from Ethiopia, Lasta. Considering all these facts one can conclude that the movement of the Tarqe and Tawqe, which is explained in the first theory can be seen as an internal movement of Agaw tribes. They were just an addition to the indigenous dwellers of Agaw tribes. Even this can be confirmed by asking elders, migrant Blin, who say there were other Blin speakers like Bet Musi before they arrive in the region.

The people of Ethiopia and Eritrea, especially the Semitic language speakers are called “Habesha”. According to some sources (Raka 1986) Habesha refers to the hybrid mixture of Semitic with Hamitic (Cushitic). It is a combination of Ham “be” (with) Shem as Ullendorff (1960) put it succinctly “*in any event, it is the amalgam of the Agaw with immigrant Semitics which has given rise to the main Ethiopian □Eritrean□ type, ethnically as well as linguistically, as it has emerged in historically attested times*”. Currently the population of Semitic group (Amhara, Tigrinya, Tigre and others) is estimated around 24 million. How many people crossed the Red sea to make this number in 3000 years? Most probably they absorbed the indigenous inhabitants of the region to make this number. Today the Eritrean population is 80% Cushitic origin wise (Ghaber 1993) but the socially superior minority Semitics impose their language and culture. On turn the majority Cushitic deformed the language and culture and give rise to the today's Eritrean type. Thus, in today's Eritrea it is difficult to find a pure race origin wise.

If this theory is taken as true and correct, it is easy to understand and explain the movement of the late comers of the Blin tribes (12 Neged and others outside this group). Generally the origin of these groups is from the central highlands; places like Temben, Logochiwa Zawl, and Shiketi. These are places of the indigenous Agaw people absorbed by the Semitic people. When people move from their original place to a new, already inhabited place the immigrants have two alternatives; either they have to fight to force out the inhabitants and occupy the place or they have to agree

with original inhabitants and assimilate. Most probably the latter scenario took place in the Blin case, because the original inhabitants of the region were not forced out of their habitat. Thus, the late comers have to have a ground to be accepted by the inhabitants, either they have to trace their ancestral line or should have some other kind of relation which the original dwellers can benefit from.

Moreover, when assimilation takes place it is the less developed who assimilate to the well developed. The Semitics came with a civilized culture to the Cushitic region and imposed their language and culture. As a consequence they easily absorbed the Cushitics, who were less developed. Thus, there is no reason for the well developed to be absorbed by the less developed. If the late comers of the Blin were from the Semitic (well developed), what was the reason to be assimilated with Blin (less developed)? There is a live example of the Kunama (Baden) people today. They were forced out of their original place and divided into two groups. The names of the places are still there. Those who remained are forced to assimilate with the Semitic people.

In conclusion, just to say Blin migrated from Lasta seems a history which doesn't have scientific truth. However, the migration of Blin brought additional Agaw tribes to the already existing Agaw groups, i.e. the Blin. Thus the Agaw people were the indigenous inhabitants of the Keren region, known as Blin today. In addition, the Blin who joined later were originally the indigenous Agaw tribes assimilated with Semitic people in the highlands; and all Blin be it Tarke, Tawke, 12 Neged and others have the same origin and history. All of them have the same customs and way of life, due to this they followed each other and lived together for thousand years in harmony and unity.

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